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AUTHOR Barker-Plummer, Bernadette
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ABSTRACT

To investigate what the news is by looking at journalists' practices and sources from a historical perspective, a study conducted a computer content analysis of levels of attribution and institutional sources in "The New York Times" and "The Los Angeles Times" from 1885 through 1985. Using the GENCA program that matches a user-constructed vocabulary list with text files, the study analyzed randomly sampled sentences from the front pages of the two newspapers. Levels of attribution increased over time in both newspapers. The level of institutional sources (defined as all government or state-related sources) also increased over time, and certain types of institutional sources, such as executive-level government officials and anonymous sources, showed a dramatic increase. These trends suggest that although reporters are using more attribution over time, the sources they are turning to are likely to be central, official, government sources. (Author/MM)

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LOOK WHO'S TALKING: A STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES IN TWO MAJOR PAPERS 1885–1985

by

Bernadette Barker-Plummer
Department of Journalism
University of Texas at Austin[1]
July 1989

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[1]In Fall 1989 the author will join the PhD program at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

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LOOK WHO'S TALKING: A STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES IN TWO MAJOR PAPERS, 1885–1985

Bernadette Barker-Plummer

July 1989

Abstract

"What the news is depends very much on who its sources are," wrote Leon Sigal in 1973. This study is concerned with investigating what the news is by looking at journalists' practices and sources historically. It is a computer content analysis of levels of attribution and institutional sources in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* over a one hundred year period, 1885–1985.

Using the GENCA[1] content analysis program, randomly sampled sentences from the front pages of these papers were analyzed.

Levels of attribution were found to be increasing over time in both newspapers from 1885–1985. The level of institutional sources (defined as all government or state-related sources) was also found to be increasing generally over time. Some particular types of institutional sources, like executive level government officials and anonymous sources, showed a dramatic increase.

These two trends, of increasing attribution and institutional sources in the news, were found to be related statistically when measured with Pearson correlation, suggesting that although reporters are using more attribution over time the sources they are turning to are likely to be central, official, government sources.

[1]GENCA is a copyrighted BASIC program written by Dr. Wayne Danielson, Dept. of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin.

The people on whom we depend for contact with the outer world are those who seem to be running it. *Walter Lippmann.*

Every day the news media sell us a picture of the world and we act on the information that they present. We vote for certain candidates, we buy certain products, and it may be that the issues we think of as important at all, are transferred to us from the media agenda. (McCombs, Shaw, 1972, 1977), (Iyengar, Kinder, 1987), *etc.*

It is important, then, that we understand how the media construct this reality — how the media agenda itself is set. In particular, this study is concerned with *whose* reality the mass media have come to reflect. It looks at the sources journalists have turned to for information and opinions on the world over the last 100 years in two major newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times.* Following indications from recent studies of journalistic practices, (Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1980; Fishman, 1980), this study concentrates on institutional sources — those sources, from the desk sergeant at the local police station to the anonymous cabinet official, that routinely appear in the news.

Attribution and sources are integral parts of modern journalism. Journalists are taught to attribute information and opinion to sources whenever possible.[2] And historically, the practice of attributing fact and opinion in journalism has been credited with removing the subjectivity and partisanship of individual journalists, editors and publishers from the news.[3]

But clearly it matters *who* is being quoted.

Sigal (1973), Gans (1980), and others,[4] have argued that certain routine work practices of journalists and the organizational structure and management of news industries have made journalists increasingly dependent on institutional sources. These researchers point out how the "beat" system of regularly assigning reporters to certain places, usually government or institutional centers like City Hall or the State Department, to collect news, presupposes an institutional definition of news. And they describe how reporters, under deadline and looking for sources, are attracted to institutional sources who provide large amounts of "free" and ready-made information to reporters. These sources, already attractive because of their positions as public officials, become even more so to reporters on deadline.

Gandy (1982) has coined the term "information subsidies" for these kinds of handouts that are provided at a low cost to the news media because the

[2]For example see Mencher (1977)

[3]For example, see Emery and Emery (1988) or Mott (1952)

[4]See Tuchman (1978), Fishman (1980). All of these studies are described in more detail in the literature review.

provider thinks they will affect opinion to his benefit.

In short, observation of current journalistic practices has suggested that finding reliable, verifiable, or at least attributable news within the current economic, deadline and beat system of newspapers, means that reporters are increasingly attracted to institutional sources.

This study continues the research into journalists' routines and sources but approaches it from a long-term historical perspective. Journalism historians have traced the beginnings of "objective" or unbiased news practices back to the mid 19th century, so this study looked at newspaper samples from the 1880s to the 1980s.[5] It traces the trends in institutional sources and in levels of attribution over the 100-year period and looks closely at specific types of institutional sources and at their news contexts. I pay particular attention to anonymous sources, whom journalists and critics have found problematic.[6]

Attributing to sources has generally been seen as a positive aspect of journalistic practice. Certainly journalists and editors perceive it to be a fundamental part of detached reporting. Journalists do need to attribute information to sources. But they could *conceivably* turn to sources outside the bureaucratic institutional environment. This study measures attribution levels over time and correlates them with levels of institutional sources over time to gauge how closely attribution and institutional sources are connected — to measure how much the rise in attribution has been used only to quote more institutional sources.

Hypotheses

This study suggests that journalists, bound within an economic and organizational structure that limits their time and resources, have become increasingly likely to use bureaucratic sources, particularly government officials, as sources over the last 100 years. And in fact, the routines they use to achieve objective or detached news — attributing to sources, for example — may only be increasing the number of powerful official voices in the news.

The explicit hypotheses of this research were:

1. As objective or detached journalism became the professional norm over the last hundred years,[7] I expected that attribution levels would increase.

2. And if, as the research suggests, (Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980), reporters looking for sources under deadline are turning more and more to institu-

[5]Shaw (1967) detected a significant change towards unbiased/objective coverage of election news in the 1880s, through the use of more wire copy. Schiller (1979) traces the beginnings of these practices even farther back, not long after the 1830s and the penny press. Schudson (1978) found the beginnings of professional reporting in the 1880s, but distinguishes between this "naïve empiricism" and objectivity, as we define it, as a set of routines, which he sees as arising in the 1930s.

[6]For example see Culbertson (1978), Hale (1983), Wulfemeyer (1982), Barker-Plummer (1988)

[7]See Shaw 1967; Schudson 1979; Schiller 1979

tional government officials, I expected that those sources would be found to be increasing over time also.

3. I expected that both trends would be related. That is, that as attribution levels increased or decreased so would the institutional source levels, reflecting the journalists' reliance on institutional officials as sources.

4. Within the total trend in institutional sources, I expected that some types of sources would be increasing while others decreased. Hart (1987) has pointed to the increasing presence of the President in the news and Sigal (1973) found a trend away from legislative sources — senators and congressmen — to a concentration on executive officials by journalists. I wanted to test these trends over time.

Subsidiary research questions involved investigating the news context of anonymous and expert sources.

Literature Review

This study is a hybrid. It grew out of three major areas in the literature: the historical, the sociological and the stylistic.

It measures data at the stylistic level — words and phrases — but abstracts from that data evidence to support the larger political arguments made by those researchers who have studied how the media reality is constructed. As a long-term analysis, it is also concerned with investigating some of the questions raised by historians in the field about the development of journalists' routines and source use over time. Consequently, this review of the literature has incorporated works from all three approaches.

Objectivity and Attribution

Attribution has long been recognized as a mainstay of objective journalism. One way to avoid injecting reporters' opinions into the news is to have all opinion and inference attributed to a source.

Other studies have looked at attribution as a measure of journalistic performance. Like this study, they have assumed that higher levels of attribution mean that journalists are working harder to keep themselves out of the news — to be more professional or "objective" in their newsgathering.

In a study of the effects of Spiro Agnew's attacks on the broadcast media, for example, Dennis Lowry (1971) used attribution as part of a measurement of "safeness" in media content in differentiating between types of content before and after Agnew's attacks: more attributed opinion and inferences after the attacks than before, meant that the media was reacting to criticism by playing safer.

He found that the broadcast media, after the attacks, had indeed tended to use more attributed reports than before, and concluded that Agnew had had an effect on coverage.[8]

Later, in a study dealing with differences in structure between issue-oriented social stories and event-oriented social stories Michael Ryan (1979) also used attribution as one measurement in distinguishing between different types of news.

He expected to find stylistic differences between event oriented stories — the "spot" news type — and "issue" type stories.

He found to his dismay that in both event and issue-oriented social news, unattributed sentences were more frequent than attributed sentences of all types. He found some differences between the news types but not as much as he expected nor even always in the direction he expected.[9]

These studies reflect the general feeling in the field that attribution is a positive aspect of journalistic practice. By attributing fact and opinion the journalist removes herself from the news and makes it more detached or objective.

However, it clearly matters just who the journalist turns to for information or interpretation. And recent sociological research has pointed out that today most of a journalist's routine sources are institutional sources. These sources are usually found in bureaucratic government departments – from the desk sergeant at the local police station to the anonymous cabinet official – and they are found in most stories every day.

Institutional Sources

In one of the first studies in this area Leon Sigal (1973) looked at the structure and organization of newsgathering in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

Sigal found that reporters used "routine" channels — by which he meant organized bureaucratic events like press meetings, press releases and official government proceedings — twice as much as they used "enterprise" or self-generated, investigative, channels in finding news. And, he found that reporters on these papers turned to government officials as sources more often than any other kind of source.[10]

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[8] Lowry broke down broadcast content into sentence types from the system of S.I. Hayakawa and found a 9 percent increase in attributed report sentences – the safest type of sentence according to Lowry.

[9] Ryan also used the sentence breakdown system of Hayakawa with attributed/non-attributed status as additional breakdowns. He expected event-oriented social news to be better attributed, to rely more on report-type sentences and less on inference and opinion, but in fact found that often the differences were in the other direction with issue-oriented news having higher "objective" measures.

[10] In a content analysis of national and foreign news stories on the front pages of the *Post* and the *Times*, from a sample of stories between 1949 and 1969, Sigal found a high level of institutional source use by reporters. Sigal found that 58.2 percent of sources in both papers

The view of journalism that this suggests to Sigal is far from that of an "objective" or detached fourth estate. Rather he sees journalists following the dictates of an entrenched "beat" system that presupposes an institutional definition of news. This system, and journalists professional practices, encourages journalists to turn to institutional officials to affirm or interpret the news that they provide. Such a system is open to abuse and manipulation by sources and Sigal sees official sources emerging as the major forces setting the media agenda.

Newspapers are essentially business enterprises and the beat system is perceived as an economically efficient way to find news.

But the news is not just bought and consumed like other products — at the buyers own risk. In modern societies the mass media provide much of the information that we all act on.

However, the role we assign to the media — and the role that they often assign to themselves — does not equate with what they do. "What the news is," says Sigal, "depends very much on who its sources are."

Mark Fishman (1980), in a more recent study of journalistic practices on a mid-size California newspaper, also found a reliance on bureaucratic information sources.

He explains how journalistic practices — particularly the "beat" system — presupposed an institutional definition of news on this paper.[11] Having invested time and money in placing reporters at institutional outlets, the paper made use of their "news" whether it was intrinsically interesting or not.

Sigal's study showed a reliance on officials in Washington, where we might expect a higher institutional reliance, but Fishman confirms that the routine use of institutional, bureaucratic sources can also take place at smaller papers outside the government center.

Fishman also found that reporters internalized the bureaucratic values and approaches to information. They tended to accept bureaucratic information as fact, but would check out other types of information from other sources.

And they became accustomed to treating events from a bureaucratic standpoint.

Fishman argues that journalists' routine use of bureaucratic sources, and their adoption of institutional standards, legitimates institutional sources. They become the norm in the news where in fact they are normative idealizations of reality. Paletz and Entman (1981) have also made this point. In their observation of city council meetings, and then, of the reporters accounts of these meetings, these researchers detected a legitimizing and idealizing approach also.

Gaye Tuchman (1972, 1978) is also concerned about routine journalistic practices. She sees "objective" practices of attribution and counter-attribution,

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combined came from routine channels. And 46.5 percent of total sources in the *Times* and the *Post* combined were U.S. Government officials. These figures are compared to mine directly in the Results Section, Table 4.

[11] Fishman was a participant observer on *The Parissima Record*, circulation 45,000, California.

primarily as routines that journalists use to protect themselves from criticism in their profession and which do not add to the truth-value of news.

In a participant observer study at a large daily metropolitan newspaper, Tuchman observed that faced with an uncertain world, reporters used routines to deal with their jobs. They attributed and counter-attributed "truth claims" — quoting and counter-quoting within a small institutional environment — because they did not have the time or resources to check statements. Tuchman labeled this the "web of facticity" where journalists balance one statement with another, thus protecting themselves from claims of bias. The "web of facticity," though, does not help in presenting what the reader needs to know — whether the statements are true.

Tuchman, like Sigal and Fishman, questions whether the routines journalists use in their search for detached or unbiased news, actually help or hinder the search.

Gans (1980), also addressed this question in a study that looked at both the picture of America that emerges in news coverage, and at the journalistic practices that make up that picture.

In a content analysis of *Time* and *Newsweek* and the major broadcasting stations over a few years, he found that the news consisted mostly of "knowns" — people in positions of institutional power — doing official things.[12]

Within this general category of "knowns," Gans found, as did this study, that presidents, presidential candidates and other federal officials were the most frequent news sources. State and local officials and criminals also featured regularly in routine news. Ordinary people, or representatives of groups outside the government showed up infrequently in the news.

Gans also observed journalists at work to determine how this kind of news came about. Of all of the factors involved in newsmaking, Gans highlights *source choice* and the drive for *efficiency* as the two major forces that make the news what it is. The pressure of time encourages use of the most "efficient" sources — institutional officials. These officials are reliable, available sources of information to a journalist on deadline. The "beat" structure of newsmaking, of assigning reporters specifically to cover such sources, is journalism's recognition of its dependence on these sources, says Gans.

This reliance on public officials, Gans says, explains why the news is full of officials, official activities and official interpretations of reality.

Other researchers have also pointed out the reliance of journalists on these "efficient" sources. Goldenberg (1975) points out how the ability of such official sources to provide cheap, processed information to reporters, gives them an immense advantage over resource-poor groups in getting their views into the news. Gandy (1982) looked closely at the information provided to journalists

[12]Gans, (1980), pp. 9-10. Gans found that in television stories in 1967 close to 70 per cent of actors in the news could be classified as "knowns" — as a presidential, federal, local or legislative official of some sort. In magazine stories the percentages were even higher. And he found (p.16) that most of the "activities" mentioned routinely were government related.

in a number of public policy issue areas, and concluded that those wishing to manipulate the media agenda, and potentially public opinion, could do so very effectively through producing cheap, or "free" information to journalists. He called this practice "information subsidies" and pointed to a number of cases where sources, both government and private, had at considerable expense to themselves, produced information that tipped the policy discussion in their favor. Bennett (1988) and Parenti (1987), and other political science scholars, have applied this knowledge about journalists' practices to analysis of coverage of political issues. They have argued that the current media practices of reliance on status quo sources severely restricts the scope of political discussion in the media, particularly in limiting the access of ideas that might challenge the existing political system.

Anonymous Sources

A particularly disturbing aspect of journalists' dependence on institutional sources is their use of *anonymous* official sources. Named officials may use the media to further their own goals, but at least the critical reader can speculate about their motives. Unnamed officials are presented to the reader on trust — a dubious proposition that readers should trust sources who will not be held responsible for their words.

A number of studies have looked at anonymous sources in the news and at their effects on readers perceptions. In general these studies have agreed that anonymous sources are a disturbing aspect of journalistic practice. They are problematic to critics, and to journalists themselves, who often want the information offered but resent the source's dodging of attribution.

Wulfemeyer (1982), for example, looked at newspaper policy on anonymous source use after the Janet Cooke affair, which shook up the journalistic community. He found that news executives were concerned about the use of anonymous sources. Despite this concern, however, only about one in four large news organizations had a formal written policy concerning their usage.[13]

St. Dizier (1985) looked at levels of anonymous sources comparatively in 1974 and 1984 in major Florida newspapers, and found that journalists claimed to be using these sources more carefully.

In an experimental setting, John B. Adams (1962, 1964) attempted to distinguish between different types of anonymous sources and to find out which ones people found most credible. In the original study the anonymous sources connected with government — "officials" or "government sources" — had the highest credibility. In a later study (1964), however, where news context was included, the differences were not confirmed.

Hale (1983) found that type of attribution was less important to readers than story type. Factual stories were deemed more believable than opinionated

[13] In a survey Wulfemeyer found that about 57 percent of news executives asked said that the Cooke affair had made them more careful in the use of anonymous sources.

stories. Attribution made some difference, but in general readers were relatively unaware of attribution differences.

Culbertson and Somerick (1977) looked in more detail at some of the variables that affected views of anonymous sources. They noted that people with a greater knowledge of public affairs were more likely to note — and to approve of — anonymous sources, even with other factors, like education, controlled.

In a later study (1978) Culbertson looked at stylistic elements of veiled attribution in *Time* and *Newsweek* and compared them to newspaper use of anonymous sources. He found that the magazines, like newspapers in a previous study, did not give much information useful in assessing source credibility.

The literature on anonymous sources has generally documented concern about the use of these sources in the world of journalism but has not found direct effects, negative or positive, on the audience.

However, the use of anonymous sources, added to the heavy reliance on institutional sources of all sorts, may have more subtle, longer term effects than can be gauged in an experimental setting.

Historical Perspectives

The history of journalism has traditionally seen the rise of objective practices as positive. Journalism has been portrayed as an onward and upward progression from partisan newspapers, heavy in opinion and analysis, to a more "objective" representation of the "facts" that is said to exist today.[14]

Certainly the news has become less obtrusively partisan.[15] But whether the practice of objective routines, like attribution, have made the news more objective, or have presented a truer picture of reality, is debatable.

Recent historical studies have traced the development of journalistic routines and have outlined a historical development that was driven, not by ideals of "objective" information for citizens, but by economic and social factors.

Dan Schiller (1979) has pointed out how the development of objective journalism was critically connected to the commercial development of the mass media. From the very first penny papers, profit was an overriding motive of newsgathering, says Schiller, and often professional rationalizations came later.

In this view of journalism's development as driven by economic considerations, the heavy use of institutional news sources is not a surprising development. These sources are cheap, efficient ways to gather news.

Michael Schudson (1978) also looked at the development of professionalism in journalism and found it to be closely connected to social and historical trends outside the profession.

In a sociological interpretation of journalism history, Schudson outlines the rise of professionalism in American journalism and traces the ideal of objectivity. Unlike other researchers Schudson does not credit the technological

[14] For example see Emery and Emery (1988) or Mott (1952)

[15] The U.S. media have very successfully sold independence as a positive trait. Many, if not most, European papers still adhere to a partisan view in interpreting reality.

advances of the wire service with inspiring neutral news but argues that values and ideals of journalism were molded to reflect and appeal to the tastes of the well-to-do.

Summary

These studies have been concerned, as I am, with the contradiction between how we perceive and use the news — as information on which to base decisions in political and social life — and what the news actually is.

These researchers have studied journalistic routines and the structural and economic environment of news gathering and they have found that the news is often a reflection of hierarchical, institutional or commercial concerns.

Methodology

The methods used in this study were computer content analysis, using the GENCA program written by Professor Wayne Danielson (University of Texas) and secondary statistical analyses using STATGRAPHICS statistical package.[16]

GENCA

GENCA is a BASIC program that matches a user-constructed vocabulary list with text files — in this case samples from *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* — and then outputs a list of "hits" broken down into categories.

The vocabulary lists can be designed to measure any concept the user chooses, making GENCA a very flexible content analysis tool. The program also has the advantage of processing text in its natural form — as sentences — using words and phrases as the units of analysis.

However, like other computer content analysis programs, GENCA is blind to contextual meaning and is used most effectively with a specialized and tightly designed vocabulary list.

In the second part of this study GENCA was modified slightly to output the sentence context of word "hits" as well as the word itself, so that some context analysis could be done manually.[17]

This Study

This study was concerned with measuring two concepts - attribution and institutional sources.

Attribution is defined as those occasions when reporters quote or paraphrase other sources in their writing. It is usually delineated by such words

[16]GENCA, copyright 1987, Wayne Danielson, 2817 Glenview, Austin, Texas, 78703.

[17]The modifications to GENCA were written by Dave and Bernadette Barker-Plummer. The modified version is called ACNEG to distinguish between the two and can be obtained from the authors on request.

as "said" or "announced," and I have measured it using these kinds of words. Institutional sources are defined in this study as all government or state related sources at national and local levels, including law enforcement and judicial sources.[18]

Sample

A random sample of twenty sentences per year for the period 1885-1985 was drawn from the front pages of both *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* using a specially designed random sampling computer program.[19]

These two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, are both respected, major newspapers and I have assumed that they are indicative of trends in the profession generally.[20] *The Los Angeles Times* was chosen to give the sample a geographical spread and to correct any bias that might result from *The New York Times'* self-proclaimed role as a newspaper of record. However, as the Results Section shows, the papers were much more similar than dissimilar in major trends.

The sample totaled 4,000 sentences in all. GENCA was then run on these sentences using two separate vocabularies - INSTSOUR, which measured institutional sources, and ATTRIB, which measured attribution.

Dictionaries

INSTSOUR was broken down into ten different categories of institutional sources:

- Executive National Sources — e.g. President, Secretary of State.
- Executive Local Sources — e.g. Governor, Mayor.
- Legislative National Sources — e.g. Senator.
- Legislative Local Sources — e.g. City Council, Alderman
- Military Sources — e.g. Lieutenant, Sergeant.
- Police Sources — e.g. Patrolman, Police.
- Legal Sources — e.g. Judge, Counsel.

[18] A complete vocabulary list can be obtained on request. There are some examples in the next section.

[19] An original sample of ten sentences per year for the years 1900-1985 was drawn by Wayne Danielson's graduate content analysis class in Spring 1988. The original sample was doubled by this researcher. Candace Beaver contributed the 1885-1900 samples. The random sampling program was also designed in Wayne Danielson's graduate content analysis class, the final version being written by graduate student Edmund G. Elfers.

[20] Generalizability and comparability are always problematic in studies of this kind and I have discussed this further in the final section: Further Research

- Expert Sources — e.g. Doctor, Scientist, Expert, Study.
- Anonymous Sources — e.g. Spokesman, Reliable Source.
- General bureaucratic — e.g. Committee, Agency.

The breakdown was designed to yield general trends — such as a trend towards national rather than local sources — as well as more specific trends. Other studies, Hart (1987), Sigal (1973), had found a centralizing tendency in news reports and this study expected to find that sources were also becoming more centralized.

The ATTRIB vocabulary list had only one category and consisted of common declarative verbs and phrases used in journalism to indicate a quotation or paraphrase - for example, "said," "announced," "stated," "according to."[21]

The results of running GENCA with both of these vocabularies on the 100-year samples of both newspapers were then analyzed statistically.

Pearson Correlations were run for each of the categories, from each newspaper, with time and with attribution.

A high, statistically significant, positive Pearson Correlation between any source category and time was interpreted to mean that that measure was increasing over time.

A high, statistically significant, positive correlation between any source category and attribution was interpreted to mean that those particular types of sources were being quoted more.

The correlations were run on both newspaper samples together, then on the samples separately, to determine if there were any differences between the newspapers.

News Context of Sources

As well as determining trends in sources over time, this study attempted to find out more about the use of some sources by looking at the news *context* in which they were used. In particular, it looked at the context — or type of news story — associated with anonymous and expert sources. News critics and journalists have found these kinds of sources problematic.[22]

To this end, GENCA was modified slightly to output the sentence context around each "hit" word as well as the word itself. Each time GENCA hit and counted an anonymous or expert source, it also saved the sentence it found the word in, and the date of the newspaper sample, so that the sources could be placed in their news context.

Using these sentences it was possible to classify almost all (about 90 percent) of anonymous and expert sources into one of ten news categories. The

[21] Complete lists of both vocabularies can be obtained from the author.
[22] See for example Culbertson (1978)

classification system used – see Table 3 – was similar to those used in agenda-setting studies to classify newspaper content (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, Eyal, 1981). For example, a typical sentence would run as follows:

> The United States, one *ranking White House source* said, is interested in dealing with the countries of Eastern Europe on the basis of mutual respect and in exploring the problems of East-West relations which are very much on our mind.

And this anonymous White House source would be classified as having a Foreign Affairs/Defense context.

Those sources that could not be identified (10 percent of all anonymous sources found could not be identified as to news type) were discarded from the analysis and the remainder computed as a percentage of the whole that could be identified.

Results

Trend Analysis Both Papers

Levels of attribution — the frequency with which journalists quote sources other than themselves — are increasing over time in this sample of both papers.

Institutional source levels — the frequency of mention of state-related sources — are also increasing over time in this sample.

And these two historical trends are related statistically, suggesting that, as journalists look to quote more individuals, the likelihood of those individuals being state or government related sources is high.

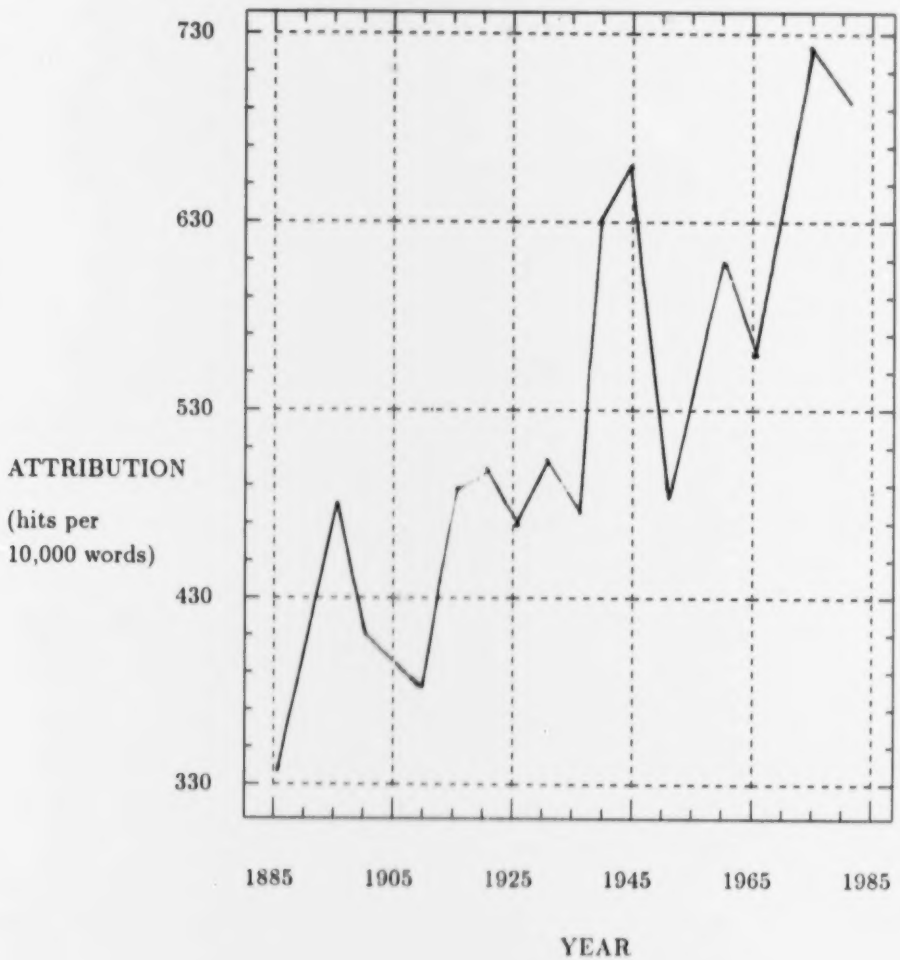
These general trends and relationships tend to confirm sociological research that suggests that the practices of modern journalism — "objective" practices such as attributing opinion to sources — have as a side effect encouraged journalists' dependence on institutional sources.

The increase over time in levels of attribution since the 1880s, is also in line with the historical research which places the beginnings of "objective" journalism around that time. Shaw (1967) points out that it was around this time that wire copy began to be used in quantity and this affected his "bias" measurement, because the wire copy was deliberately less interpretive. Schudson (1978), agrees that journalism began to change in the 1880s but argues that objectivity, as we know it, as a set of routine practices, did not become the norm till the 1930s. This study shows attribution on the rise before 1930 (though it does rise more steadily afterwards.) [23]

[23] This study uses a shallow sample with five year aggregate data points for long-term trend purposes and it is difficult to be precise about exact dates. Further empirical research in this area, using a deeper sample and a breakdown by year, would be useful.

Figure 1

Trends In Attribution Over Time in The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885-1985



Data points are five-year aggregates. For example, 1975 includes 1970–1975.

Figure 1 illustrates the trend line for levels of attribution over 100 years, 1885-1985, for both *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* newspaper samples taken together. Attribution, as measured in this study by a count of words like "said," is obviously going up over time. The trend line has some dips and highs – 1945 is an unusual high and 1950 an unusual low – but in general the trend from the 1930s is upwards.[24]

Figure 2 illustrates the trends in total institutional source levels, taking all of the categories together. Again the trend is upwards[25]

Source Breakdown

Within the general trend toward higher levels of institutional sources, some interesting differences occur between different types of institutional sources. As you will recall from the Methods section, the institutional sources vocabulary had a number of different categories.

Table 1 shows each of the source categories correlated with time and attribution.

Executive sources show a dramatic increase over the last 100 years. The Pearson correlation between executive sources and time is .65($p < .01$). These sources, like "President" and "Secretary of State," are also highly correlated with attribution, suggesting that they are being quoted as well as simply appearing in the news – Pearson correlation .68($p < .01$).

This result confirms other studies that have pointed to an increase in Presidential rhetoric in the news (Hart, 1987) and to an increasing centralization in news sources, (Sigal, 1973). And, in fact, a closer inspection of the data here showed that more than half (54 percent) of the "hits" in this executive category were simply for the word "president."

Anonymous sources, those unnamed officials such as "reliable sources" or "government officials," are also increasing over time. Table 1 shows that the Pearson correlation for this class with time is .84($p < .001$), and with attribution is .74($p < .001$).[26]

Other categories have less clear cut trends. Legislative sources, for example, as Table 1 shows, are not seen to be increasing or decreasing significantly

[24] The 1945 high comes from more military sources than usual. It is not possible to tell why 1950 is a low. This is a fairly shallow sample, with the emphasis being on long term trends so a certain amount of "noise" will be apparent in the trend line.

[25] The early peak, in 1890, is a random error. This particular front page had a story listing new government appointments, therefore having an unusual number of sources mentioned. Other peaks and troughs are "noise" in the shallow sample. Correlational statistics were used in order to overcome sample "noise" and determine general trends.

[26] The distribution over time of anonymous sources is a clear upward trend after 1930. The line has clear highs in the 1930s and jumps again in the 1960s. These sources are a fairly modern phenomenon. They do not appear in significant numbers until the 1930s, suggesting that they may be connected to the routines of objective journalism that Schudson (1978), highlights as beginning in the 1930s.

Figure 2

Trends in Institutional Sources (all types) in The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885-1985

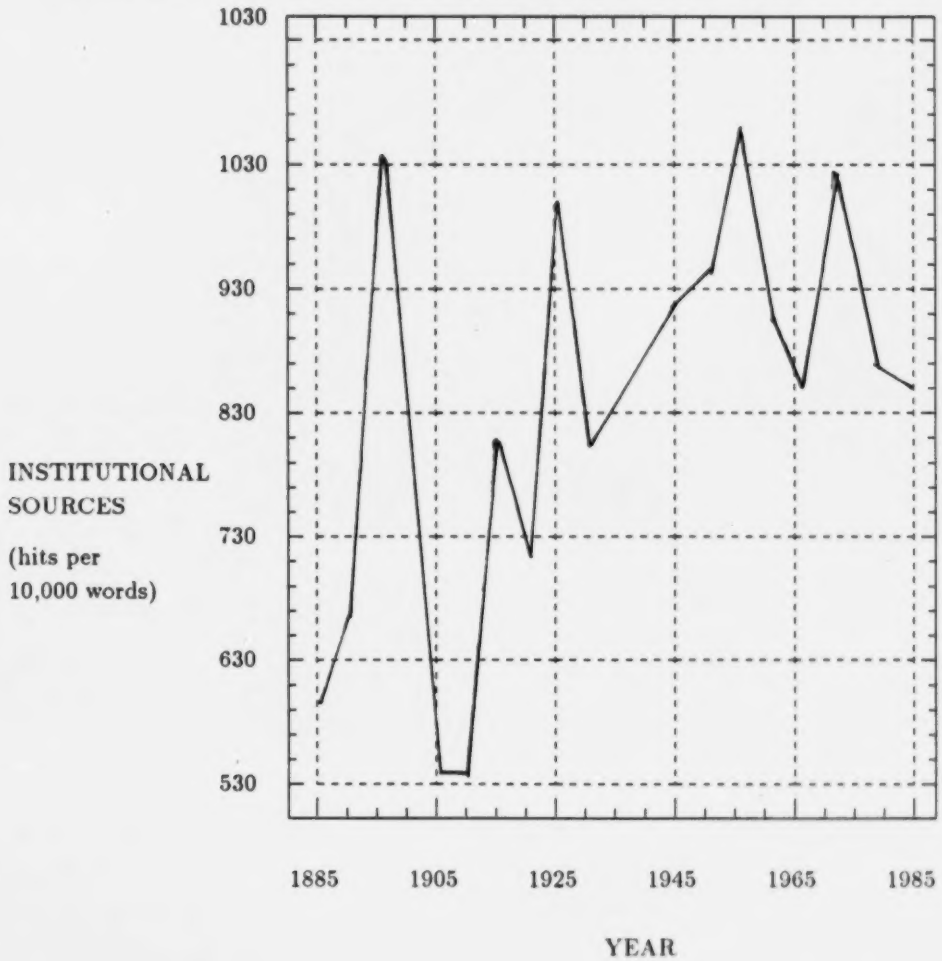


Table 1

Pearson Correlations: Institutional Sources Over Time and by Attribution Levels, The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885–1985

	Year	Attribution	N (No. of "Hits")
Year	—	.8475*	
Total Institutional Sources – All Categories	.5971**	.6332**	1,904
Executive Sources	.6460**	.6765**	463
Legislative Sources	.0144	.0488	394
Anonymous Sources	.8467**	.7436*	128
Expert Sources	.2306	.1599	141
Military Sources	.0147	.1808	384
Police Sources	-.2524	-.2153	208
Legal Sources	.1259	.1780	186

*$p < .001$
**$p < .01$

in this 100-year sample.[27] Military, police, legal and expert sources do not have significant showings either when taken together in the two-newspaper sample, though they do begin to show definite trends when the sample is broken down into individual newspapers.[28]

Differences Across Newspapers

When the sample was broken down into individual newspapers the upward trend in executive and anonymous news sources remained, as Table 2 illustrates, though there were some differences of degree.

The Los Angeles Times showed a higher correlation for attribution over time than *The New York Times*, perhaps because it has become a major newspaper more recently than *The New York Times* and has been catching up rapidly in professional practices. And *The Los Angeles Times* showed a slightly lower correlation with executive sources over time, which might be an indication of geographic distance from the national executive center. Neither were major differences — both retained high, positive correlations.

Other source types showed two relationships when the sample was broken down that had canceled each other out in the two-newspaper sample.

Police sources, for example, as Table 2 shows, were seen to be increasing moderately in *The Los Angeles Times*, (Pearson correlation, .47), while decreasing significantly in *The New York Times*, (Pearson correlation, -.64).

And expert sources are increasing in *The New York Times* but not in *The Los Angeles Times*.

Perhaps *The New York Times* is becoming less concerned with crime news and substituting educational or scientific news where experts would turn up more frequently than police sources.

Larger Trends

As well as the increasing use of specific sources, larger trends also became apparent in this analysis.

The increase in executive sources is broken down further in Figure 3 and points to a larger trend — that of national over local sources. As the graph shows, national executive source levels are much higher than local executive source levels — the President is in the news much more in these newspapers than the Mayor or Governor.

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[27] The trend line shows that the distribution over time for legislative sources is very up and down. These sources increase from 1920 through 1965 and then decline until an all time low in the 1980-1985 sample. Graphs of all of these source types over time can be obtained from the author.

[28] In the double sample the military, police and legal sources seem to be fluctuating randomly over time. Graphs of all sources plotted over time are in the Appendix.

Table 2

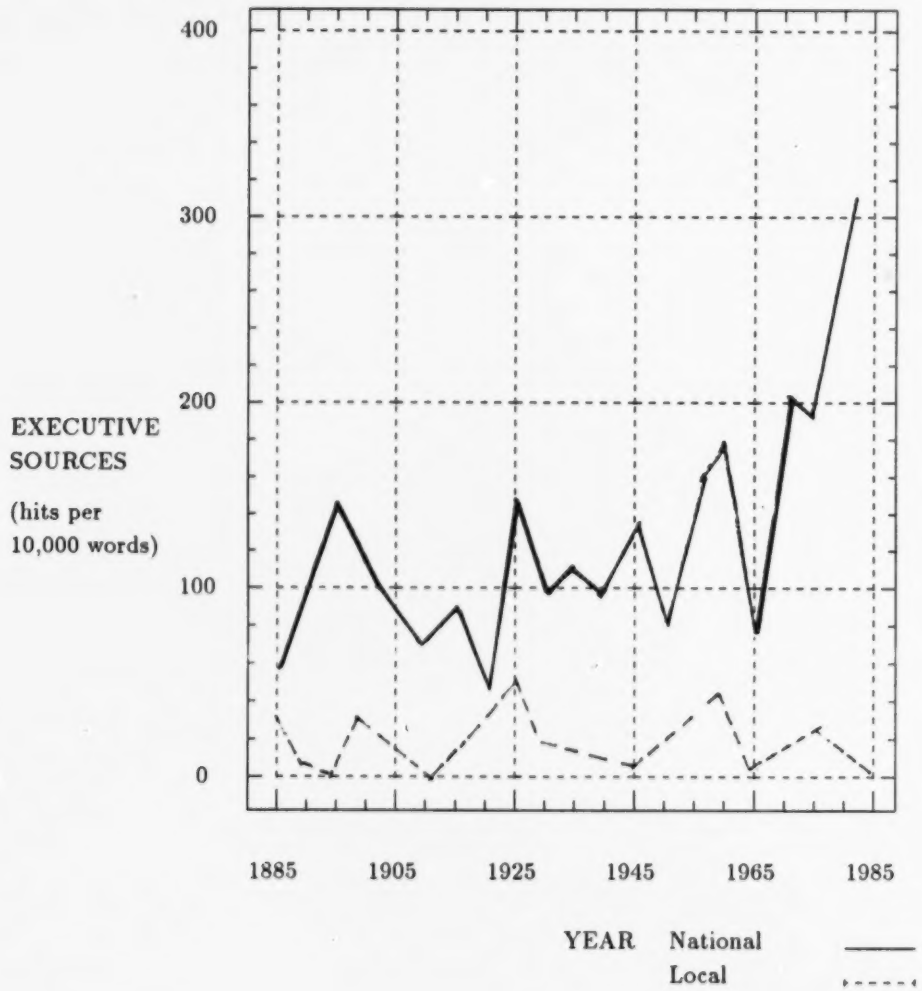
Pearson Correlations of Sources Over Time. A Comparison Between The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885–1985

	Attribution	Executive	Legis	Police
New York Times	.6382**	.6220**	.0515	-.6431**
Los Angeles Times	.8196***	.4924*	-.1004	.4727*
Both	.8475***	.6460**	.0144	-.2524
	Anonymous	Expert	Legal	Military
New York Times	.6887***	.3947*	.0919	-.0632
Los Angeles Times	.6919***	.1739	-.2553	-.0239
Both	.8437	.2306***	.1259	.0147

*$p < .1$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$

Figure 3

A Comparison Between National and Local Executive Sources in The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885-1985



And, as the figure shows, while the national executive trend is continuing to rise, the local executive trend may be tending downwards.[29]

Figure 4 shows a similar contrast between executive and legislative sources at the national level. While both are at almost equal levels until the 1960s, the trend since then shows the executive source level increasing and legislative decreasing.

These findings are in line with other researchers. Sigal (1973), for example, found in his study of sources between 1949 and 1969 that legislative sources were being used less by reporters, while executive sources were being used more. He noted that Senators and Representatives were aware of the concentration on executive level sources and were working to combat it by issuing press releases and making themselves more available to reporters. Hart (1987) in his study of Presidential speeches found that the President is in the news much more than ever before, at the expense of other government and non government sources. Other researchers have also pointed to the increasing centralization of news and news sources, (Gans, 1980; Bennett, 1988; Parenti, 1987.)

This centralization of news sources, and the dominance of executive level sources within that centralization, is obviously a reflection in part of the general centralization of power that has occurred over the century. Researchers in other fields have pointed to the rise of the "Imperial Presidency" in the United States, where executive, presidential power has been extended at the expense of Congress, and federal funding and aid policies have made the localities more dependent on the federal bureaucratic center.[30] But this study argues, as have others, that it is this equation of *news* with government action and government perspective — almost certainly an "insider," status quo perspective — that is the problem with news coverage. By constantly turning to elite, executive sources for opinion, journalists do not only narrow the range of opinion in the news, but they legitimize this narrow definition of news and and of news sources.[31]

It seems, then, that sources in the news are increasingly likely to be national, executive, anonymous sources. The President, or an unnamed official in the White House or in his cabinet, is more likely to be quoted than any other kind of state source.

Context Analysis

The increase in anonymous sources over time shown in this study and a previous one[32] provoked further analysis of the circumstances in which anony-

[29] Both of these are major papers that include a lot of national news. Further research might compare these trends with local papers where the emphasis on state/local sources might be higher.

[30] For example, (Schlesinger, 1973)

[31] See Fishman (1980) for a discussion of this process.

[32] See Barker-Plummer (1988).

Figure 4

A Comparison Between Executive and Legislative Sources Over Time in The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885-1985

Table 3

Context Analysis of Anonymous and Expert Sources in The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times 1885–1985

News Type	% Of Total Anon Sources	% Of Total Expert Sources
General Economic	14.0	8.8
Foreign Affairs/Defense	53.7	27.2
Social Issues	4.1	8.8
Science	2.5	28.1
Business	5.8	6.1
Labor	3.5	5.3
Crime/Disaster	9.1	4.4
Energy/Environment	3.3	1.7
Government Performance	3.3	6.1
Legislative	0.8	3.5
	N = 128	N = 141

mous sources turn up. A breakdown of anonymous and expert sources by their news type is detailed in Table 3.[33]

In this 100-year study the overwhelming context of anonymous sources was found to be foreign and defense related news.[34] Over 50 percent of all anonymous sources that could be contextualized in this sample were concentrated in foreign or defense related news. Many were unnamed military spokesmen, for example, some were Cabinet officials talking about foreign policy and some were unnamed foreign officials.

Economic news — with leaks about the budget and similar quotes — was the second largest area for anonymous sources with 14 percent of anonymous

[33]If you recall, GENCA was modified to give the sentence context of each "hit" on an anonymous official for the 100-year period. I then classified these sources into one of 10 news-type categories, using the contextual information in the sentence, as well as notations I made about story-types while collecting the sentences. The categories used were similar to those in agenda-setting studies and are shown in Table 3.

[34]The distribution over time of anonymous sources, if you recall, went from very low to very high, a steady increase over time. Anonymous sources are a fairly modern phenomenon. While the table is a breakdown of all anonymous sources that could be contextualized over the 100-year period, then, most of them are modern sources.

sources classified as being in economic related news.

Expert sources were spread more evenly across news types as Table 3 shows. Not too surprisingly, expert sources are connected most often with science-related news (28.1 percent).[35]

The next largest category, however, with 27 percent was again foreign or defense related news.

Results Summary

This study found that institutional sources are increasing across time in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* according to a measurement of vocabulary in randomly sampled sentences.

Some categories like executive national sources and anonymous sources are increasing quite dramatically.

Not only are institutional sources increasing across time, they are also related significantly to the attribution trend suggesting that as reporters quote more people those people are likely to be national, executive, anonymous sources.

The anonymous sources – those disturbing sources that are left unnamed to the general reader – tend to be concentrated in defense or foreign news.

The implications of such a heavy diet of officialdom are discussed in the next section.

Conclusion/Discussion

Perhaps the most striking implication of so much officialdom in the news is the ironic twist it places on the press's traditional role as government watchdog. The press has been described as the fourth estate, the final check in a system of checks and balances, but it may be far too closely connected to the institutions of government to be be much of a watchdog.

Officials' use of the news media may reflect a desire for democratic openness, but it is just as likely that officials use the media to manipulate the political agenda. The relationship between reporters and sources has best been summed up by Gans:

> The relationship between sources and reporters resembles a dance, for sources seek access to journalists and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not sources do the leading.[36]

[35] That the largest category is science, may be an artifact of the vocabulary list used. Experts that can be described at word or phrase level with no further elaboration tend to be professional, technical experts – e.g. doctor, professor. There may be a number of experts among other categories that are impossible to distinguish in this analysis. I am relying on the fact that when reporters use experts they usually identify them as experts ("expert," "specialist," etc.) or use an accepted title (Dr., etc.)

[36] (Gans, 1980) p. 116.

What Gans is inferring, of course, and what other researchers are more explicit about (Gandy, 1982; Parenti, 1987), is that official sources use journalists to manipulate the news. And they do it on a day to day basis both by providing and withholding information, by making themselves available or unavailable to reporters.

Journalists' ideals — their professional desire for detached or objective news — make them look to sources for attribution and the structural and economic set up of the news industry adds to the attraction of already powerful sources.

Thus the professional ideal of detached news — of quoting sources and keeping oneself out of the news — co-exists with news that essentially legitimates the status quo by emphasizing the news and views of those already in power.

Obviously, the trends toward higher levels of institutional sources found in this study, and the move toward using more executive, national sources within that increase, can be seen as part of a larger societal process towards centralization and institutionalization of power over the last 100 years in the United States. As the central government expanded, as the Presidency extended its powers, journalism can be seen as merely following the center of power.

But it is precisely this equation of news with elite policy actors world views that has become the problem. We all depend on the mass media to present us with the information we need to make rational decisions in life, and that information must often include more than government news managers can, or will, provide.

Certainly some of the actions of the government are legitimate news fare. But the overwhelming reliance of journalists on institutional sources for information and opinion is rather like asking the fox how things are going in the chicken coop, or as Lippmann observes, we are depending on those who are running it, for news of the outside world.[37]

Even if reporters, as they claim to be, are alert to source manipulation in the short term, the long term theoretical implications of so much officialdom are more disturbing.

If journalists talk mostly to officials, and this study shows those kinds of sources increasing, then the chances of alternative voices being heard, far less listened to as legitimate or compelling, decline.

Institutional officials, despite their portrayal as antagonists in the traditional news-story format of quote and counter-quote, are all elite "insiders," as Lippmann might dub them. They may stand on either side of the — very low — partisan fence, but they have a world view that has much more in common with each other than with "outsiders," and it can usually be assumed they are in favor of maintaining the status quo.

Real dissent is unlikely to be heard in this set up unless it shouts — or perhaps chants — very loudly. And even if protesting voices can make them-

[37] Lippmann (1922).

selves heard above the constant background chatter of officialdom, the chances of their being heard as legitimate or compelling voices are low. They are shrill noise against a backdrop of quiet, routine, official, news chatter and, not surprisingly, they are often seen as bizarre or illegitimate.

Mark Fishman (1980) makes this point eloquently:

> It is not so much that the media convinces news consumers that all is well with the present social and political order. Rather, news consumers are led to see the world outside their firsthand experience through the eyes of the existing authority structure. Alternative ways of knowing the world are simply not made available. Ultimately, routine news places bounds on political consciousness.[38]

A final point that may be made regarding official news is that it can seem incoherent and distant from the average reader who has no background information on the internal policy-making struggle or personal infighting that is the real backdrop to most institutional news.

Of particular concern in this area is the increase in use of anonymous sources that has been marked in this study and in others (Culbertson, 1977, 1978), (Wulfemeyer, 1982).

While named officials make the news institutional, they can at least be identified and their motives speculated about. Anonymous sources can seem chillingly distant. Lacking background, the reader has no grounds on which to judge their information.

Further Research

This study looked at attribution levels and source use in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* over the last hundred years. I have assumed that trends in these two papers can be seen as indicative of trends in the profession generally, but of course it is entirely possible that they are exhibiting practices peculiar to themselves. There are some differences between the two papers, *The Los Angeles Times* exhibits "objective" tendencies later than *The New York Times* for example, perhaps indicating its more recent professionalization, that may be even more obvious when compared with other papers. Further research in historical source use and attribution might include other papers for comparisons.

Of particular interest would be a comparison between national and local papers, and national and international papers. Fishman (1980) did find a tendency towards using official sources in his study of a mid-sized California paper but further research is needed to find out if this is true of local papers more generally.

[38] Fishman (1980) p. 138.

As with all studies, extending the sample base would increase the study's reliability. In this study (using twenty sentences per paper per year from the front page) detail was lost in favor of long-term trend analysis. Further study might use a deeper sample and so be more suited to pinpointing specific dates of historical changes.

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